

Rural Evangelism – Rural Ministries Course November 3rd 2009

Synopsis of presentation

Offering a smorgasbord of ways I use to encourage engagement with faith sharing in a rural context.

Some of these initiatives and ideas are not exclusive to the rural situation, but do lend themselves very well to this context.

Short poem by Rudyard Kipling – six wise men; who, what, when, how, where, why.

These ‘six serving men’ could form the basis of a very informative way of exploring what it means to be Church today.

The most important question to begin this process is – why? The ‘why’ informs the how, who, what, when and where.

Why would/could/should we evangelize?

My driver is to see more disciples working towards a realized Lord where God’s name is held in honour, where we see signs of the Kingdom in our communities, where we know forgiveness, where everybody receives their daily bread and that we name and face evil for what it is.

Definitions;

Rural – choose a model you like and work with it!

Evangelism – a wide range of definitions trying to encapsulate some aspect of faith sharing, e.g. N.T.Niles ‘one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread.’

Basically by evangelism I mean that particular activity by which a person is invited to respond to the call of the Gospel upon their lives. And much in the same way someone might get married, give themselves totally and utterly to Christ for the rest of their lives.

Evangelization –

Bringing Gospel values into all aspects of life – seeking a realized Lord’s Prayer.

A definition of evangelization from Pope Paul’s document Evangelii Nuntiandi:

For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new....

Evangelization is a term more favoured of catholic's and although to a large degree is a matter of subtle semantics does offer a helpful way of thinking about faith sharing in a rural context.

We are called to be both salt and light.

We can think of salt as our being immersed in our communities and light as being distinctive, we shine as lights and point people to the truths of the Gospel.

One of the most effective means of evangelism is one to one story telling. But in a rural context this might not always be the best way, certainly initially. One definition of a rural village is where you sneeze at one end and someone the other end says, bless you! It is here that a third agent can 'particularize the Gospel when local sensibilities make it difficult to do so.' This could be a person invited in to assist or preach or give a talk, perhaps at a Harvest Supper. It could be a mission team, or even a DVD, something like Alpha.

INSPIRE MAGAZINE – is a great free magazine that tells fantastic stories of God at work in people lives. (CPO)

From this kind of platform an opportunity can arise for people to say this is my story and this is how it came to me and what it means to me to be a Christian today.

It can be helpful to try and work out a structure for our personal story and there are two friends who can assist us, Ben and Karen

B = before
E = encounter
N = now

Ben would be for a conversion Christian

K = known
A = acknowledged I needed to know God personally
R = made a response
E = evaluated my life in the light of this
N = what is life like now as a Christian

Karen would be for a cradle Christian.

Here is one way we can encourage people to think about and begin to share their faith story and is particular aimed at members of a Church Council or some such body.

1) Turn to your neighbour and chat about how you got here – i.e. car, train, horse, etc.

2) Next I want you to talk about how it is you have come to serve on the Church Council.

3) I am making an assumption that you have chosen to serve on the Church Council because of a Christian conviction and perhaps a sense of duty or calling. So, again with your neighbour share with each other how you became a Christian.

4) Finally, can anybody tell me anything about this Church building, its age, dedication, etc?

Summary of above exercise and to begin to move into asking further questions for example using the 'six serving men.'

Someone as an act of Christian faith and as a witness set about raising this building. That torch of Christian witness has now passed into your hands.

So, how do you plan to hand that light on or is this where it all ends, on your watch?

The danger here is that a Church (people) begins frenetic activity just to maintain the Church (building).

However handled correctly this can provide opportunity for faith sharing. There is still enough truth in the statement that in urban areas people belong to a Church, whereas in rural areas the Church belongs to the people.

You could for example embark upon initiatives that will help maintain the building **and** engage people in considering things of the faith.

One idea would be to develop the Church building for a wider community use and thereby possibly attracting grants.

Of course someone might well say that we are very limited in what we can do because we are only a few in numbers.

However remember that a tangerine is not a failed orange and that a small church is not a failed big church!

The Growing Healthy Church exercise has much to commend it and in particular the Angels exercise is well suited to the rural Church.

In the GHC exercise there are seven marks of a healthy Church and mark 7 is 'Does a few things and does them well'

However the important aspect of GHC, either the full analytical exercise, or the Angels exercise is that the Church should be seeking to grow, growth in spirituality, in prayer and also in numbers.

And while rural schools offer fertile soil to nurture cradle Christianity we also need to be seeking conversions to Christianity or reappraisal of lapsed faith.

And whether as child or adult the journey to faith is now well recognised as a process.

Bishop John Finney's report on Mission England in the 1980's discovered that a journey to faith takes on average four years.

But like courtship and engagement the goal is marriage – we do not want people just to walk with Jesus or even live with him, but in effect have him set up home with them. John 14: 23

The process must lead to a crisis – the journey leads to the cross and beyond into new life in Jesus.

One further exercise could be 5 I's. (This exercise could equally be done in any context but is particularly well suited to the rural Church which often struggles with the idea of moving beyond evangelization to evangelism.)

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